



HQ AETC News Clips

Randolph AFB TX



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AF sergeant faces charges

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Mary Moreno
San Antonio Express News

A Lackland AFB sergeant was charged Friday in a case involving a murder-for-hire attempt against a staff sergeant.

Technical Sgt. Rodney E. Wells is charged with solicitation to commit murder, soliciting a civilian to commit prostitution and conspiracy to commit assault, according to a news release from Lackland.

Wells is accused of trying to persuade Staff Sgt. Daniel Sickles, 24, to hire him to kill Sickles' wife, Clairese. When Sickles refused, officials said, Wells then persuaded Sickles' wife to hire him to arrange her husband's death in exchange for part of the life insurance proceeds.

Clairese Sickles, 22, is out on \$50,000 bond. She was charged in February with conspiracy to commit capital murder.

Wells also is accused of taking a civilian to Houston and asking her to have sex with several friends in exchange for money and of conspiring with three friends to assault a co-worker who had talked to Wells' superiors about his off-duty conduct.

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SLAIN AIRMAN HONORED



BOB OWEN/STAFF

Dog handlers train Friday at the 341st Training Squadron at Lackland AFB. Senior Airman Robert S. Gray, a military dog handler who was killed while on patrol in the Philippines in 1978, has been honored with the dedication of a kennel in his name at the base, which is home to the military's dog training program.



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Delays on rape-case evidence bring new scrutiny to military

By

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Special / Bryan Leazenby

"Whatever happened with my case, I would hate to see other women go through the same thing. I thought about taking my life every single day. They made my life a mess." - Leah Kaelin, who reported she was raped by fellow airmen in June 2003.

Last June, 18-year-old airman Leah Kaelin lay shaking on a hospital bed as a nurse swabbed her body with Q-tips for forensic evidence that she had been gang-raped by four fellow service members at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas.

It took eight months, however, for officials at the Texas training base to notify her that the laboratory analysis supported her story, she said.

In the meantime, Kaelin endured a torturous waiting period in which supervisors downplayed her allegations, allowed her alleged attackers to continue living in her dormitory and gave her a string of minor punishments that led to her discharge, according to Kaelin and military documents.

"Whatever happened with my case, I would hate to see other women go through the same thing," Kaelin said. "I thought about taking my life every single day. They made my life a mess."

The Indiana native's story bears similarities to dozens of other reports by women who have accused the military of mishandling their cases. But Kaelin's ordeal has raised new concerns that have drawn the attention of top Pentagon officials: delays in the processing of forensic evidence so crucial to prosecuting rape cases.

A Sheppard spokesman denied that Kaelin's criminal complaint was disregarded but acknowledged that delays were caused by "protracted" processing of evidence at an outside Army laboratory - a potentially widespread problem that Air Force Secretary James Roche says is being investigated throughout the service.

"We are committed to doing everything we can to take care of victims, and we're confident our commanders will make appropriate decisions in order that individual cases are accurately processed in a timely manner," said a statement from Roche's office.

It wasn't until February, after The Denver Post questioned Sheppard officials about their handling of sexual-assault allegations, that a law-enforcement official contacted Kaelin: The results of the medical exam were finally back from the laboratory, allowing them to pursue prosecution.

"I was shocked," Kaelin said. "It had been over eight months. Before then, they wouldn't tell me anything about the investigation. Why would it take so long?"

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While Sheppard officials say that it took the Georgia-based U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Laboratory, which handles evidence for the vast majority of military installations, eight months to process her samples, Army officials have a different story. No evidence kit from Sheppard took longer than six months to be analyzed, according to Army officials who, at The Post's request, reviewed Sheppard cases during the past two years.

None of the military officials would release details regarding Kaelin's evidence, such as when the analysis request was actually made, citing privacy concerns and the ongoing investigation.

But outside experts say the lag raises questions about the priority military officials placed on her evidence analysis, as well as whether there is a backlog at the Army lab.

"There's no reason this type of thing should take eight months," said Arnold Donohue, director of a 1999 review by the National Academy of Public Administration panel into military sex-crime investigations. That review found broad problems with military investigations, including "delays in evidence turnaround" at the Army facility.

"They work with modern equipment but in an antiquated and insufficient facility," the NAPA report noted.

New lab in works

Army officials said they take evidence analysis seriously, as proved by the upcoming groundbreaking for a new Georgia laboratory that will enhance evidence processing, said Chris Grey, chief of public affairs for the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command.

Rape-kit exams consist of biological samples taken from the victim, such as hair, blood and semen, which is then matched against suspects. Such evidence bolsters a victim's claim in court. To understand the full picture of why delays plagued Kaelin's case, experts said it's important to know the date the kit analysis was requested and whether the Sheppard command introduced additional evidence discovered.

In cases such as Kaelin's, in which suspects are immediately identified, delays shouldn't happen, said Donohue and other experts.

The Air Force sent a task force to investigate the handling of sexual assaults at the Wichita Falls, Texas, training facility after a Feb. 11 Post story reported that more than two dozen Sheppard women sought sexual-trauma counseling at a civilian crisis center for assaults by fellow airmen between 2002 and 2003. Five of the cases were gang rapes. Most of the women told counselors that they did not pursue criminal complaints because they feared career repercussions.

Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison criticized the Air Force review's findings as incomplete, saying they raised even more questions, including what happened to 69 additional Sheppard sexual-assault cases the task force found that never led to prosecution.

Congress, meanwhile, is conducting a sweeping review of problems militarywide, and Georgia Sen. Saxby Chambliss recently singled out Sheppard as a concern, saying "the level of violence that's alleged to have occurred out there really bothers me."

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Kaelin has accused four fellow airmen in connection with her assault, but because no charges have been filed, The Post is not naming the alleged attackers. The men, as well as Kaelin's commanders, did not respond to requests for interviews.

Terrifying experience

One of the newest members of the 361st Training Squadron, Kaelin was learning to become an aerospace equipment mechanic and had been on base only three weeks on June 21, when she accepted an invitation from four other trainees in her squadron to visit a nightclub in Lawton, Okla., about 50 miles north of Wichita Falls.

When they arrived at the club, she discovered it was a strip bar. "I had no clue," she said. "I felt very uncomfortable."

Over the next several hours, Kaelin recalls, she drank about six beers and began feeling unusually dizzy - not intoxicated but a drugged sensation, she said. Disoriented and feeling sick, she went back to a motel room with the airmen.

Kaelin awoke later with blankets covering her head, unable to move a muscle. She said she heard the airmen's voices and realized her clothes had been removed.

"I remember one of them saying, 'We should gang-rape her,'" Kaelin said.

She then passed out.

The next morning, she woke up with her pants missing, experiencing extreme vaginal pain. Still fighting off lingering dizziness, she noticed the men were asleep in the room. In the bathroom, she discovered she was bleeding.

The airmen refused to say a word to her. Kaelin said she knew that one or some of the airmen had forced sex with her. Using her cellphone, she called a friend at the base to meet her when she arrived.

Back at Sheppard, her friend urged her to go to the police. From that point forward, Kaelin and her mother say, investigators and commanders mishandled her case in a variety of ways.

She was not given a victim advocate to help her navigate the process and find counseling. And investigators, Kaelin said, put her through four hours of questioning before sending her to a local hospital for the rape-kit exam.

"I was absolutely furious," said Maritza Ellis, Kaelin's mother. "I work for a police department, and the way they did things with the rape exam were not proper police protocol."

David Peterson, president of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors, said standard practice among police organizations is to conduct rape exams first to capture all evidence quickly.

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"I'm not aware of agencies that don't deal with the victim and her exam first, then go on to questioning," Peterson said. "That would not be standard practice."

Medical records of Kaelin's preliminary exam show that doctors found several abrasions consistent with sexual assault.

Kaelin requested updates on the investigation as she tried to recover during the next few weeks, but never received any answers, she told The Post.

Although her squadron commander, Maj. William Ferro, issued a no-contact order to prevent her alleged attackers from speaking to her or touching her, Kaelin said she saw them almost every day - in the hallways of the dorm building they lived in, in the cafeteria while the squadron members ate together and elsewhere around the base. They called her vulgar names and flashed her intimidating looks, she said.

"I was terrified, and I didn't eat," Kaelin said, noting that she lost almost 30 pounds. "I asked my first sergeant if I could move out of the squadron. She told me, 'We'll use that as a last option.' But there were no other options. The situation didn't change," she said.

Kaelin's supervisors also challenged her account of what happened and blamed her, she said: "One day, my staff sergeant said, 'Well, if you were drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, I guess you got what you deserve.' I started crying."

Another supervisor called her story "crap."

Kaelin was sliding into despair. She contemplated suicide. She couldn't focus on training. At the same time, she faced a string of disciplinary actions, including smoking cigarettes, driving her car and, finally, leaving the base without permission in September to marry another service member who consoled her and provided her with emotional support.

"I am recommending your discharge from the United States Air Force for minor disciplinary infractions," said a November letter from a supervisor, noting that her discharge would be characterized as honorable. Her husband also was discharged, in part because they left the base to elope.

Fighting for information

Military policies do not prohibit commanders from discharging service members who report crimes. In fact, the practice has been rampant throughout the armed services, according to Tod Ensign, director of Citizen Soldier, a veteran advocacy group.

"Rapes are peculiarly sensitive issues," Ensign said. "But commanders, as recent Air Force surveys have shown, are not providing environments in which rape victims are protected. Just the opposite is happening."

Through last fall, Kaelin's mother kept demanding answers from base officials about the investigation and the punishment her daughter was facing, but she received no answers. Several calls to Brig. Gen. Arthur Rooney Jr., who commands the bulk of training operations, went unreturned, Ellis said.

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"Her commanders were focusing on her actions, the victim's actions, not the guys who attacked her," Ellis said. "They weren't believing her. Her commander said to me, 'Some women cry wolf.'"

By November, Kaelin had been discharged from Air Force without being told of any progress on the investigation.

In February, a Sheppard law-enforcement official called with news of the rape results.

It was a "good case," Kaelin and her mother said they were told, and subpoenas would be issued soon. Sheppard officials declined to comment on whether a hearing is pending.

Kaelin's family is bewildered by the length of time it has taken, as well as the toll it has taken on her.

They believe it is more than coincidental that media coverage of Sheppard's problems, as well as the internal Air Force investigation being launched, occurred the same week they received notice the evidence analysis was complete.

"I think they were trying to cover it up," Kaelin said. "By kicking me out, it made it easier."

Ellis agrees: "I'm thinking they were hoping it would go away. But Leah's a fighter, and she kept asking questions and wouldn't let it go away," Ellis said. "With the story coming out and the delegation (of Air Force investigators) being sent, I think Sheppard finally got serious about it."

Kaelin, whose parents both are military veterans, said she is saddened that her dream of a life in the Air Force is over. She is looking for a job to make ends meet until she can decide on another career path. And she understands the career-based fears that drove so many Sheppard women to a civilian rape crisis center.

Her career did end.

"I'm trying to figure out what my future is now," Kaelin said. "It's hard. I don't know what I'm going to do."

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